

Reintegration After Deployment

Supporting Citizen Warriors and Their Families

Since 2001, the National Guard and Reserve have been utilized at unprecedented levels to fill key roles in overseas operations, with more than 800,000 reserve component members called to active duty since 9/11. As a result of these increased demands, guard personnel and reservists have experienced more overseas deployments—often in combat situations that extend for long periods or occur in rapid succession.

In many cases, this shift in operational tempo places a strain on families, especially as citizen warriors reintegrate back into their civilian lives and return to their civilian jobs after deployment. A smooth reintegration is critical not only for family well-being but also for military readiness.

Despite reintegration's importance, few studies have examined what guard and reserve families actually experience during this time. Recent research by the RAND Corporation aimed to fill that gap with one of the most comprehensive examinations to date of the reintegration experiences of reserve component members and their families.

Achieving Reintegration Success

RAND researchers administered a survey and conducted interviews with service members and spouses. The responses indicated that families with successful reintegration experiences share common traits. These families felt ready for deployment, had good communication with the

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KEY FINDINGS

- One size does not fit all families: There is no “recipe” for reintegration after deployment, and problems experienced during reintegration vary across families and over time.
- Families that report a smooth readjustment are more likely to have favorable views toward continued service in the National Guard or Reserve.
- Although family initiative is central to successful reintegration, DoD can play a role by emphasizing early preparation and facilitating good communication.
- Resource providers outside DoD abound, but a lack of coordination and other barriers may prevent families from making the most of this vast “web of support.”

service member and with the member’s unit during his or her time away from home, and tended to be comfortable financially. When the service member deployed with his or her own unit and returned home without a combat-related wound, other physical injury, or a psychological issue, readjustment tended to go more smoothly.

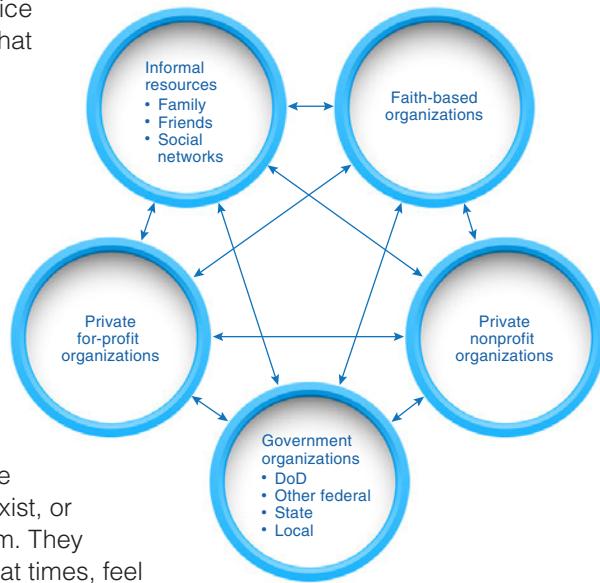
In many cases, family initiative was key to a smooth readjustment following deployment: Maintaining good communication, deliberately carving out family time, and making use of reintegration-oriented resources all helped achieve positive outcomes. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) can use these findings to empower families to be active, effective architects of their own reintegration success. Doing so is important because families that reported that readjustment went well also tended to have favorable views toward service members’ continued service in the National Guard or Reserve.

Although many families in the study sample fared well during reintegration, others experienced problems related to one or more of the following issues: emotional or mental health, health care, civilian employment, the spouse/partner relationship, financial or legal matters, child well-being, and education. Some problems were experienced soon after the service member returned home, others emerged later, and still others ebbed and flowed during reintegration. These families tended to have characteristics that differed from those associated with successful reintegration. Understanding these challenges and identifying the most effective ways for DoD to help mitigate them was at the heart of RAND’s research.

Reintegration Resources: The Web of Support

There is a vast array of resources to assist reserve component families during reintegration—what the RAND researchers characterize as the “web of support” (see figure). These resources offer assistance in a wide range of areas, including education, health care, spiritual support, and social networks. While families most frequently cited using services offered by the service member’s unit, they emphasized that private organizations, faith-based organizations, and state and local organizations were helpful in providing support as well. In addition, almost half of guard and reserve families in the study sought assistance from informal resources—family, friends, and social networks.

Despite the breadth of resources available, however, challenges can arise in supporting guard and reserve families. These families are not always aware that resources exist, or they have difficulty accessing them. They are concerned about quality and, at times, feel



overwhelmed by the web of support. Resource providers also face barriers to supporting families. Providers interviewed for the study noted difficulties reaching some populations, particularly because many reserve component families do not live near military installations and are geographically dispersed. The stigma related to seeking help for problems, a lack of coordination across providers, and, in many cases, limited efforts to assess how well providers are doing also hinder providers' efforts to help these families.

Improving DoD Support

While some responsibility for successful reintegration falls on reservists, guard personnel, and their families, there are steps DoD can take to facilitate the process. The study's findings led to recommendations in two general areas: improving DoD support resources and improving the broader web of support for families.

Improving DoD Support Resources

- **Emphasize early preparation for reintegration.** For example, taking steps to promote family readiness before deployment and to plan in advance for service members' return home may facilitate a smooth reintegration. DoD should also consider ways to reach out to families sooner after deployment.
- **Ensure that family members are involved in the reintegration process.** Spouses are particularly important because they can be a strong source of support for service members—as long as they are kept in the loop and their own needs are met. Good communication is critical to keeping all family members involved as well, and DoD should encourage this.
- **Shape perceptions about reintegration.** Contrary to popular belief, there is no right way or best way to reintegrate. DoD can shape perceptions of reintegration in several ways, including reducing the stigma related to seeking help for problems and recognizing positive reintegration strategies.
- **Ensure that units have the resources they need to support families.** Unit-based resources were one of the top resources used by study participants both to prepare for reintegration and to navigate the reintegration period. Accordingly, it is important that units have the resources they need for regular, personal communication with families that includes conveying information about resources available to help with reintegration.

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Improving the Broader Web of Support for Families

While DoD has a central role to play in providing support for reserve component families in conjunction with the deployment cycle, it does not have to “do it all.” A second set of recommendations thus focuses on improving the web of support.

- **Target a broader audience to support families.** DoD should expand its efforts to leverage the support resources offered by nongovernmental programs, promote community awareness of the challenges reserve component families face, and honor employers that support guard and reserve employees.
- **Identify gaps and overlaps in the web of support.** The web of support could be a powerful force multiplier in assisting guard and reserve families, and DoD should leverage other organizations’ efforts.
- **Facilitate coordination across resource providers.** DoD can help expand the level of interaction between different types of resource providers and build on existing networks.
- **Work with providers to address reasons for lack of resource use.** This could include efforts to target specific populations, reaching out to them at different points during the deployment cycle, and leveraging informal resources, such as social networks. DoD can also support efforts to refine national-level resource directories by including more nongovernmental organizations and making the directories more user-friendly.
- **Encourage resource providers to develop and learn from measures of effectiveness.** DoD should convey to resource providers the value of assessing how well they are meeting reserve component families’ needs—and emphasize that the most useful measures are outcome-focused and resource-specific.

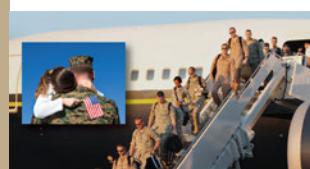
Final Thoughts

The needs of reserve component families are continually evolving and, consequently, merit ongoing attention. Although military operations in Afghanistan are winding down, reintegration support will remain important into the future because the Reserve Component likely will be called upon again to support emergency and wartime missions. Moreover, service members who have deployed over the past decade and their families may confront longer-term challenges that have yet to appear and deserve the nation’s continued support.

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Support for the 21st Century Reserve Force

Insights on Facilitating Successful Reintegration for Citizen Warriors and Their Families

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